



# NABIL NAHAS

**I know I should like it but I just can't:**

Peanut butter and jam.

**The works I could stare at for hours:**

My own.

**The artwork I will get by hook or by crook:**

The one I could sell for a great profit.

**I'd love to dine with:**

Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio.

**My top three art fairs:**

Art Basel, Art Basel Miami Beach and Abu Dhabi Art.

**Best art advice I ever got:**

"Forget everything you've learned and start over".

DESCRIBING his art collecting motto as "all over the place", Lebanese artist Nabil Nahas's (*Canvas 4.6*) approach to acquisitions is guided by his "moods which shift with time". Having grown up in Egypt and Lebanon before settling in the USA in 1968 to pursue undergraduate studies at Louisiana State University and an MFA from Yale University, Nahas's extensive collection (which dates back to the 1960s) mirrors the cultural dichotomies that have affected his life. While his apartment in New York houses works by American Figurative artist Alex Katz, the walls of his Beirut home are adorned with pieces by luminaries of the Arab art world, including Shafic Abboud (*Canvas 3.2*), Fateh Moudarres, Youssef Kamel and Mahmoud Said (*Canvas 7.1*). Although Nahas remains adamant that his purchases "do not orient towards



**“I feel like my interest in artists from [the Middle East] has been engraved in my subconscious, as it is part of my heritage.”**

a specific genre or era”, over the years, he has amassed an impressive selection of Modern Arab works, which presents a jarring contrast to his own Contemporary *oeuvre*, sated with colourful abstractions. When asked why he feels it is important to collect works by fellow artists, Nahas, who now lives between the USA and Lebanon, emphasises the power of visual stimulation. “Some people like to read for inspiration. I like to look,” he says. “What is wonderful is that each piece that I own has something different to offer, as well as a story attached to it.”

#### **What did you collect as a child?**

When I was 12 years-old and living in Lebanon, I would spend my weekends in Byblos with my friend Roy Sarrafian and scour the cliffs looking for beads, flint stones and pottery shards. Roy, who came from a family of renowned antiquarians, initiated me to this genre so I slowly began collecting these objects. The idea of owning and handling such ancient items was, and still is, fascinating to me.

#### **Were your parents art collectors?**

My parents were not ‘collectors’ *per se*, but they would buy paintings to hang on the walls of the house. Looking back, they had very good works, although not by any means Avant-garde; they were mostly by artists such as Georges Sabbagh and Said.

#### **How did you educate yourself about art?**

Pioneer Lebanese Abstract painter Yvette Achkar is my mother’s first cousin, so both she and her paintings were very much around! I also began buying art books at a very young age, which meant that I had a strong knowledge of

Modern art history early on. Then, at the age of 17, I made my first art purchases in Paris – an ink drawing by Henri Michaux, followed by a pastel work by Hans Hartung and a small Max Ernst drawing. I remember these pieces bringing me tremendous pleasure when I looked at them. And so, I continued acquiring works when I was studying at Yale and would spend my weekends in New York City and occasionally drop by Sotheby’s, where I purchased a still-life by Auguste Herbin, a piece by Filippo de Pisis, one by Yves Klein and several works by Lucio Fontana. That is how my art collecting began. All these names were familiar to me thanks to my childhood art books rampage! One must also remember that these were pre-Internet days and the art market had not yet been globalised, so you could still luck out once in a while.

#### **How did works by Middle Eastern artists start featuring in your collection?**

I feel like my interest in artists from the region

Facing page: Nabil Nahas holding a work by Fatch Moudarres. Untitled. 1962. Oil on board. 70 x 50 cm. On the floor, left to right: Khalil Zgheib. *Chuanine*. Circa 1960. Oil on masonite. 100 x 60 cm; Georges H Sabbagh. *Suburbs of Cairo*. 1921. Oil on canvas. 30 x 40 cm.

Below:  
Left: Mahmoud Said. (Detail) *Zikir*. 1934. Oil on canvas. 30 x 40 cm.  
Right: Saloua Raouda Choucair. *Poem*. 1963–65. Wood. 39 x 19 x 7.5 cm.







has been engraved in my subconscious, as it is part of my heritage. The first work I purchased by a Lebanese artist was a painting by Khalil Zgheib, who was one of the greatest Lebanese artists of our time. Unfortunately, I lost that work! I also had several pastels by Paul Guiragossian (*Canvas 2.4*), which were lost during the war. When I went back to Lebanon in the 1990s after a 20-year absence, I purchased an apartment and filled it with art and furniture pertaining to the region. I acquired Orientalist paintings by the likes of David Roberts, Alexandre Descamps, Eugène Fromentin, Alexandre Bida and William Woodward. On the Arab front, I purchased pieces by Daoud Corm, Saloua Raouda Choucair (*Canvas 2.1*), Omar Onsi, Saliba Douaihy, Bibi Zoghbi and Georges Cyr, to name a few.

#### What does your purchasing process entail?

I buy on the whim of the moment; I don't search for artworks, I stumble upon them. I absolutely have no rules that determine what kind of art I surround myself with, but I never look at it as an investment.

#### What grabs you in an artwork?

Art is a visual and plastic language so it is very difficult for me to verbalise why I gravitate towards a certain piece. Sometimes I feel as though the work is just there waiting for me. Art is a bit like magic, it has a life of its own and its appeal is unexplainable.

#### As an artist, what do you think the role of a collector is?

There are several levels of collecting, as there are several levels of art. It is important for a serious collector not to be a 'fashion victim', which means not to buy what everybody else owns because it is *à la mode*. A great collector buys with his eyes, not his ears. Collectors are also supposed to be educators, and ideally, an intel-





ligerly put together collection should be given to an institution and shared with the public.

**What future plans do you have for your collection?**

I am thinking of eventually turning my studio in Ain Aar in Lebanon into a foundation. But I am going to keep the art to myself for another 15 years before turning it into a public collection. I need more time to paint without interference!

**Whose art advice do you take and trust?**

My own. I absolutely go by my own judgment and it has proven me right so far!

**So you don't regret any acquisitions?**

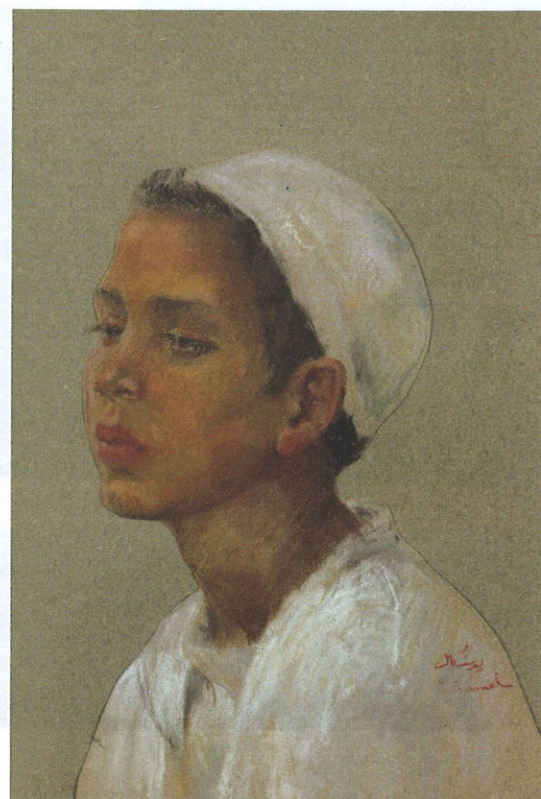
No, I haven't made any mistakes over acquisitions because I buy things that I like, never what is fashionable. I always go against the grain.

**Do you ever purchase a work as a way of endorsing the artist?**

Only if I am truly convinced by it. For example, very early on, I could tell that Ayman Baalbaki (*Canvas 5.2*) was a great painter. Ever since Saleh Barakat [Agial Art Gallery Founder] showed me his works, I knew that Baalbaki was going to go a long way. I am hoping to build up my collection of Contemporary Middle Eastern art, as there are still many great artists whose works I would like to own.


**How has your attitude to collecting changed over the years?**

When I started collecting, the works were mostly by European and American artists such as Auguste Herbin, Jean Dubuffet, André Masson, Jean Fautrier, Fontana, Mardsen Hartley, Thomas Eakins and Arshile Gorky. Now, in New York, I am mostly focused on works by Katz. At this point, I am also more interested in what is coming up in the Middle East rather than the West as the works feel fresher.



**“At this point, I am also more interested in what is coming up in the Middle East rather than the West as the works feel fresher.”**

**What are your thoughts on the current Contemporary art scene in Lebanon?**

I think it is extremely interesting and lively, given the outstanding number of emerging artists living there at the moment. I also think that there is a general interest in the arts that is booming right now over there, and that hasn't always been the case. Although my parents' generation was involved in the arts, mine, the war generation, was not. Now, when I look at my nephew's generation, I am pleased to see that there is a renewed interest and a very serious one at that. 

Facing page:  
Above: Saliba Douaihy. *View of Beiteddine*. 1938. Oil on canvas. 38 x 48 cm.

Below: Nabil Nahas holding a work by Moustafa Khalidy. *Untitled*. 2010. Acrylic on canvas. 50 x 70 cm.

Above:  
Left: Background: Nabil Nahas. *Untitled*. 1987. Acrylic on canvas. 150 x 300 cm. On buffet: Jean Royere. Fragment of a Phoenician bust. Late 14th-century, Ming Dynasty. Chinese porcelain. Variable dimensions.  
Right: Youssef Kamel. *Egyptian Boy*. Circa 1930. Pastel on carton. 40 x 30 cm.

All photography by Mansour Dib.